



Not Without You

I'm not a big fan of short days and long nights, so winter in the Northland can be kind of tough on me. But a bonus of all that darkness is our chance to add a little color to our lives with holiday lights. So the other day, my husband and I headed out into the Chippewa National Forest for our annual gathering of the Tree.

A warm December afternoon, we did not don our long johns for this trip, and even our boots were not serious, on account of the lack of snow on the ground. On the heels of a warm fall, what should have been snow came mostly as November rains.

While I appreciate an easy winter as much as the next person, I find the reasons we are experiencing such general trends to be chilling. In his newspaper column, weatherman Paul Douglas writes that these winter conditions come from El Nino, coupled with the warmest year on record. Worldwide, 14 of the 15 warmest years have occurred since 2000. Our current weather is impacted by human emissions of heat-trapping gasses. Paul explains that more CO₂ is adding 400,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs worth of heat to the Earth's system daily; 93% of that warmth is going into the oceans. Now that heat is coming out of the Pacific as a "turbocharged" El Nino; it may be the biggest ever recorded.

On this warm winter day, our destination was a piece of private property that was a job site for the logger a year or so ago. A sweet piece of pine ground, he did a nice job of opening up the over story red pine to make light for the white pine to grow. White pine is one of our tree species that may do well in a warming climate. This stand now supports some fair-sized red pines that are well on their way to becoming the big dogs, the next generation of white pine, a good amount of jack pine, and pockets of balsam fir sprinkled here and there. I love a pine stand with this kind of diversity and layers of structure. The structural complexity enhances wildlife habitat, and the species diversity helps the stand to be more resilient in the face of climate change.

The balsams were what we were hunting. They are fighting it out for growing space, and removing a tree or two will help some others to thrive. I don't know about you, but I find that it's tough to beat the smell of fresh balsam in the house. I catch a little flack about the open nature of my trees, but I figure that's just more room to hang the ornaments.

Somewhere along the way, my hubby confessed that he wished we had our “little helpers” and his Ma along. Well, I can surely understand that, but the little helpers are grown and on to other things just now, with no new crop yet on the scene. But I don’t really want to let that quell my Christmas Spirit! Our lives have many seasons. It goes better if you learn to look to the good in the present, as well as reflect on the best of the past.

A long way from most people, the place we went provided a special kind of quiet. My mother-in-law is gone now, and I found myself thinking of her as we tramped through the woods with the dogs. She was quite a tree “shopper”, and spent a fair chunk of time looking for just the right one...funny how it always turned out to be bigger than would fit her space.

All around us in this beautiful forest are the signs our world is changing as our climate warms. The skunks that should be in bed are out and about on these warm winter evenings. Princess pine, a ground moss normally covered with snow by now, pokes up here and there, inviting me to gather a little to bring a bit of something different to my Christmas wreath. And the snowshoe hares that were so abundant in this place last winter now are missing. What’s with that?

The snowshoe hare is that white hare with the big “snowshoe” feet. Those big feet help keep the hare on top of the snow, just one of the adaptations that make this hare fit well with snowy northern winters. But when the snow doesn’t come, this species is poorly equipped to survive. The change over from the hare’s brown to white fur is triggered by day length, and what has evolved to camouflage a tasty morsel that is eaten by so many other species, now makes the hare stand out as an easy mark. A brown world is a tough place for yummy white bunnies.

After picking our trees, we sat back to watch the fire for a while and had a little winter picnic. I dearly love winter picnics. After a bit, I heard the voices. First came a long, low one. Then a somewhat higher pitched howl, joined by what might be a young animal on the highest notes. Wolves. All the tree picnics we have had over the years, I have to say this is the first one where we were joined by wolves.

I loaded the dogs in the rig. The forest is thick here, and the wolves weren’t far away. Maybe they were even picking up the scent of the dogs. Wolves don’t tolerate dogs in their territory, any more than they tolerate coyotes, or wolves that aren’t members of their pack. My old golden isn’t going anywhere in such circumstances, but her son is rather full of himself, and I don’t trust him not to head out into trouble. With the dogs safely stowed away, I settled back in a while longer, but the wolves were done talking to us.

I’m not sure my hubby felt the same way about it, but I found the howling a welcome addition to the ambiance of the growing darkness at the end of the day. In our tame world, this piece of ground remains relatively wild. What better place for such creatures, than somewhere like this?

In front of that fire, I found myself counting my blessings. My loved ones, a special day in the woods providing a quiet haven for restoration, plenty of food in front of us. Those aren’t things to take for granted. Those aren’t things that everyone has.

Recently in Paris, representatives of nearly 200 nations have met to seek ways to limit the cumulative effects of human populations on the earth's climate. It's a daunting task. Who among us are willing to commit to making the changes needed to reduce our collective carbon footprint? It's not enough to expect this from your neighbors, the people who live down the road, the people who live in big cities, or developing nations far away. Have you thought about your lifestyle, and in what ways you could be more environmentally aware and sensitive? How big are your feet? Could you walk a little more softly on this earth, for the sake of your children?

We finished our special day with a warm hug. Delivered with it was a whisper from the man that he would not do this on his own. Guess what, Baby? You have no idea how much I wouldn't have done without you. The very best things happen in life when we come together.

May peace be with you.



by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
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